

Who's On First? Clean Up Your Communication!

By Anne M. Obarski

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I love classic humor! There are so many examples to choose from but one of my favorite comic duos was Abbott and Costello. They were probably best known for their routine called "Who's on first?"

The routine begins with the simple explanation of a baseball game. The frustration begins when Costello doesn't understand that when he asks, "Who's on first" and Abbott replies, "Who", that "Who" is the player's last name. Costello keeps asking the question because he doesn't think Abbott understands what he is asking. This goes on until he decides if he can't find out the player's name on first he will ask, "Who is on second?" Costello replies, "No, Who is on first", "What" is on second", meaning that "What" is the player's last name that just happens to be on second base. Whew, this is confusing just writing it! The conversation just gets funnier the longer Abbott tries to explain it and it turns into a classic disaster in communication skills.

I am sure you have been in a similar position when you have tried to explain something that you think is very simple to grasp and the other person just doesn't get it.

With the hectic schedules most of us lead, it is not surprising that daily there is bound to be a part of one conversation that we either misunderstand or miss altogether. Those missing pieces cause wasted time, energy, and resources trying to repair the snag in the communication.

Cement your communication techniques so those important facts don't fall through the cracks. Just as you can't find the necessary information on the Internet without those all important "www's", try using the following "w's" to avoid costly communication errors.

What! What is the information? Focus on clarity and brevity in both written and verbal communication. Most people scan the written word and those who are listening to the spoken word do so inefficiently.

That is why important communication should be delivered in at least two methods. Combine the methods of phone, face-to-face, email, fax and mail to make sure that the information is received. Never assume one type will suffice.

Who! Who receives the information? Make sure that as many people that need to know important information, do! With as busy as employees are, it is critically important that they are updated frequently. Keep as many of your staff in the information loop as possible. There is nothing more frustrating than talking to an employee on the phone regarding an important project or deadline and that person hasn't a clue what you are talking about.

When! When is the deadline? How often do you have a specific "window" that you must work within to finish a project? When time is of the essence, it is important to know how much time you have to successfully complete each step of that project. When there is a delay because of miscommunication, everything comes to a standstill. Time is wasted, clients become frustrated and sometimes the quality of the work is sacrificed. Follow the wisdom of my son's band teacher; early is on time, on time is late!

Who, what and when are mandatory keys of good communication skills. When the communication process breaks down, clients often question the professionalism of a company. It also makes the client feel non-important.

Recently, I had called a local restaurant to reserve their meeting room for a seminar for a client. I spoke to the manager about three day's prior to the seminar date and he said I could reserve the room from 11:30 Am. to 4:00 p.m. On the day of the meeting, as usual, I arrived ahead of time to make sure everything was set up properly.

I walked in to find the room a total disaster. The tables were scattered around the room, floor was covered with crumbs and there was a smoldering cigarette in an ashtray on one of the tables along with miscellaneous papers and pens.

The manager came in and asked me who I was! I introduced myself and the look on my face must have said it all! He said he didn't remember my reservation or me but would get someone on cleaning the room right away.

He walked out of the room and proceeded to yell over the banister of the restaurant to one of the employees to get his "butt up here". I overheard him scolding the employee in which he said he was tired of finding things scheduled without him knowing about it.

The manager grabbed a vacuum cleaner and was flying around that meeting room while the other employee was wiping off the tables. As I started moving the tables the way I wanted them for my meeting, the manager said, "Now I remember, you have a meeting with six women, right?" "And what are you speaking about?" he said. I said, "It's a leadership session." "Oh", he said, "I speak on that too!"

It was all I could do to keep my comments to myself!

This was the perfect example of poor leadership skills that transferred into miscommunication,

misunderstanding and as for me, a lost customer with lots of contacts!

When you know the answers regarding who, what and when, as you communicate, you'll avoid asking the old "who's on first" question!

Anne M. Obarski is the "Eye on Retail Performance". She is an author, professional speaker, retail consultant and Executive Director of Merchandise Concepts. Anne works with companies who are performance, profit and people focused and she helps leaders see their businesses through their customers' eyes. Anne's mystery shoppers have secretly "snooped" over 2000 stores searching for excellence in customer service. Reach Anne at <http://www.merchandiseconcepts.com> or <mailto:anne@merchandiseconcepts.com>

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